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SUBJECT: French Update on Comoros-Mayotte Issue

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: France and the Comoros continue to address the Mayotte issue bilaterally, notwithstanding the Comoros' "symbolic" effort to raise the question at the UN General Assembly. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) French Ambassador to the Comoros Hallade told Comoros Officer October 24 that progress had been made bilaterally to address Comoros' concerns about French-controlled Mayotte. (Note: France maintained control of Mayotte after independence in 1975, but Comoros still claims the island. End Note.) In Mayotte in September, French, Comoran, and local Mayotte officials met for the third session since June to address concerns about Mayotte. They made progress toward a bilateral agreement that could be signed in early 2009 (possibly by French President Sarkozy, who may visit the region then). France already agreed to reopen a Consular office in Anjouan to facilitate visa requests for Anjouanese to travel to Mayotte. In Moroni, the Embassy will open a "Mayotte only" visa window to facilitate travelers. The Ambassador noted the refusal rate for Comoran visa requests for Mayotte is only five percent (thus Comoran complaints about lack of access to Mayotte would seem exaggerated).

13. (SBU) In addition to gestures to improve visa services, France seeks to facilitate trade in goods between Comoros and Mayotte. This will include incentives for shipping and capacity building to help Comorans supply the Mayotte market (where buying power is many times higher). France also seeks to have these periodic meetings -- the next is in Anjouan in November -- to evolve into a permanent institution to improve management of Comoros-Mayotte relations. Hallade noted Mayotte is hesitant in offering much to the Comorans.

Mayotte "Consultation" (not/not Referendum)

13. (SBU) Ambassador Hallade clarified that Mayotte will hold a "consultation" in April, 2009, which does not have the legal impact of a referendum (Note: Mayotte is an "overseas collectivity" somewhere between Overseas Territory and Overseas Department in status. The vote will ask Mayotte's electorate if they wish to apply to be a Department. End Note). First, if the vote is in favor of "Department" status, it is not legally binding. Paris will face political pressure, but will not have a legal obligation. Second, if the vote is yes and Paris agrees, it will take many years to reform Mayotte's laws and institutions to comply with French law and become a Department. Third, Mayotte's status and relations with the Comoros will not change overnight; existing arrangements will remain in force. Despite these nuanced details, the Ambassador agreed that the reaction in Comoros will likely be strong if the vote passes, given the emotional nationalist sentiment for Mayotte in the Comoros.

14. (SBU) Commenting on the Comorans' October 23 effort in New York to put Mayotte on the UNGA agenda, the Ambassador said the GOC confirmed privately this symbolic move was meant to appease the pro-Mayotte groups in the Comoros. Despite this effort, Hallade believes the GOC is committed to the bilateral solutions described

above.

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